

IAWF Issue Paper

## Competing Priorities and Demands

This Issue Paper focuses on competing and increasing demands on the focus and activities of wildfire professionals and community members, and the prioritizing and commitment of fiscal resources. How can we balance institutional, social, economic and political needs – this competition for resources and time — to best manage our evolving fire challenge?

---

### Background

The issues surrounding wildland fire are uniquely different from other landscape management issues. A review of what makes this challenge so unique includes:

**Wildfire and bushfire are disruptive events.** Wildland fire events can be sudden, disruptive, and can directly impact communities.

**Wildfire crosses boundaries.** Wildland fire affects and cuts across a broad suite of other landscape features and values.

**Wildfire is Visible ...** The problem is visible when wildland fire cuts across the wildland-urban interface (WUI), and increasingly also visible outside the WUI.

**Yet periodic ...** Wildland fire tends to be periodic. Between fire events, the prominence of the issue wanes and commitment and effort erode.

**A single solution isn't enough.** In the eyes of many (including legislators and governments), the solution is seen to be more money for response and fire suppression rather than for landscape-scale treatment, prescribed fire, community education, prevention, co-production and mitigation, as well as the research that supports evaluates this range of solutions. There are many reasons that this one-tiered approach is selected to solve a complex set of problems, including:

1. Wildfire management is very complex. This is especially true for prevention. Without devoting the time to gain an in-depth balanced knowledge, legislators and governments (and likewise, citizens) can be misguided toward simplistic solutions.
2. Fire suppression has immediately visible results, whereas successful prevention leads to fewer and less destructive fires, and hence we're more likely to forget about ongoing fire risk.

3. Fire suppression, as it costs more and involves more technological resources, is likely to receive much more lobbying by interested providers of such resources/services.

4. It is more convenient for citizens to favor strong suppression, which is mostly done by professionals than to accept the shared responsibility associated with prevention.

**Fire as add-on.** In some jurisdictions, wildland fire is an “add-on” to agency staff roles and responsibilities.

**Funding and documenting long-term success.** Wildland fire mitigation is (generally) recognized to work under certain conditions. The challenge is getting funding and commitment that results in landscape outcomes and actions on the ground, which need to be practical and have tangible results that can be clearly reported on.

**A need for shared stories.** There is room for a broader narrative – focusing on mitigation, shared responsibility and community resilience and economic cost (and consequences) of uncontrolled wildland fires.

**Unique skills.** Wildland fire managers need a unique set of skills and capabilities that encompass both the natural and built landscapes within wildfire prone areas.

### Key Questions for IAW Membership

We propose a number of key questions related to suppression tactics and strategies. We invite additional responses and hope to engage your ideas and insights as part of a broader discussion. We have gathered initial responses to the questions posed below, based on input from IAWF review of this issue and related topics, but we recognize that there are varying viewpoints and perspectives. We hope to provoke ideas and insights as part of a broader discussion among the international wildfire community.

Contribute your perspective by emailing your thoughts to [issuepapers@iawfonline.org](mailto:issuepapers@iawfonline.org) with “competing priorities” in the subject line.

### Climate Change and Global Fire Trends

*1) A changing climate and severe fire weather is resulting in a greater area of wildland fire vulnerability and greater frequency and severity. What will the wildland fire challenges be in 50 years' time?*

**Response:** Climate models suggest that temperature projections are trending toward the upper end of ranges of what the models predict. If so, this would mean anticipated temperature increases in the range of 6-8 degrees for 2-3 degrees c. If these projections are accurate, then additional resources will be needed (or existing resources will need to be prioritized) to address the challenges that will come with how climate change influences severe weather, which is associated with wildland fire.



*2) Increasingly a global phenomenon: Changes in climate, in particular the increased occurrence of drought and severe heat is resulting in wildland fire becoming a problem in parts of the globe where (in living memory) it has previously not been an issue. Parts of Europe, including boreal forests, are now susceptible to severe fire events and consequences. How do we ensure that nations collaborate and support each other as wildland fire risk increases and eventuates?*

**Response:** As fire seasons lengthen and extend into a full fire year, the historical ability to share resources from the northern to the southern hemispheres and vice versa may be compromised. When all national resources are allocated during the peak of fire season, what resources will be available to share regionally and internationally?

### **Engaging Our Communities**

*3) How do we frame a narrative about wildland fire that looks to longer term landscape outcomes? This includes new perspectives on wildfire prevention, mitigation, community resilience, consequence and landscape recovery activities (as distinct from short-term response and suppression activities)?*

**Response:** Better modeling is needed to show changes in landscape over time; estimated losses in the future that looks into movement of population, changes in vegetation, changes in climate, different management option such as investment in mitigation vs. suppression, etc. Response: This argument will eventually have to be won based on economics, as the suppression and recovery costs will by far exceed costs required to educate communities, undertake mitigation works and improve land use planning controls. Response: In addition to economics the rising number of fatalities and damages to property is likely to engage the will of people to act for protecting themselves by participating in prevention efforts. Development in WUI areas must be limited and adhere to high construction standards. Unsafe houses constructed with burnable materials must stop being built – these are difficult to protect now and under the expected changes in climate it is questionable that they would be defensible in the future. However, even in Southern Europe where homes are generally built with non-burnable materials, weak points in the construction (e.g. roofing) and a public unprepared for conflagration have resulted in huge numbers of deaths in Portugal and Greece in recent years.

*4) How do we engage with, and involve, communities, industry and businesses? Community expectations are focused on fire agency and government activities. There is scope to shift to a community resilience and co-production model based on agency, industry and community shared responsibility and collaboration. Expectations need to shift to an effort that is collaborative, where responsibility for (good and bad) outcomes is shared. Effort needs to be sustained and past lessons need to be remembered and acted upon.*

**Response:** In Australia the phrase constantly used is “shared responsibility.” This phrase can move beyond a slogan to be implemented, if communities and business understand risks,



start owning risks and become a part of decision-making processes around community resilience and landscape, management. The land and fire agencies are engaging with these entities; however, their input is often not considered in any meaningful way when making final decisions what mitigation actions are taken. This will need to change to improve the "social license" for the fire management agencies. Similarly, communities need to have a better understanding on what it means to carry their share of the responsibility. Response: In the United States, states and localities are increasingly bearing the costs associated with wildfire, where historically the federal government had born most costs. In all likelihood, as localities and states bear more of these costs, there will be greater innovation in identifying locally driven solutions to deal with wildfire problems. Local financing mechanisms, like bonding authorities, may provide financial options to fund locally based work with returns paid in local jobs, losses avoided (such as watersheds and homes not damaged), and insurance claims not filed. Response: In Southern Europe there are various paradigms regarding forest fires. Volunteerism for example varies greatly with countries like Portugal and Croatia being very strong on this while Greece and Cyprus lag behind. Further-more, communities mostly expect Governments to come up with funds for fire prevention.

*5) How do we tell the success stories when the potential fire intensity is managed by prescribed fire, mechanical fuel treatments, and the "good" wildland fires that support ecological and fuels benefits? (In particular, how might we balance the stories of the economic benefits of fuels management vs. the economic consequences of reactive wildland fire management)? When considering "good" fire, an important story often untold is the use of fire by native and indigenous peoples. How do we incorporate traditional burning into today's prescribed fire tapestry?*

**Response:** Prescribed burning, its positive outcomes, and the need for increased capacity and capability needs to be framed from an economic and well as a natural resource perspective. Response: The positive outcomes of planned burning into to look a broad impact that considers secondary and tertiary impacts on business and communities e.g, long-term impacts on water yield and quality on communities, agricultural sector or long-term impact on tourism as a result of severely burnt landscapes.

*6) Wildland fire should be regarded as a "whole of community" / "whole of landscape" challenge. Fire needs to be recognized in any natural resource management and disaster / emergency management strategy. How do we frame wildland fire strategy in discussions about climate change, smoke, watersheds / water catchments, timber harvesting, soil management, biodiversity and single (threatened) species management, tourism and recreation? With a range of other threats and emerging vulnerabilities, how do we work with other disciplines to build a broader community resilience to natural disasters (of which wildland fire resilience is only a part of)?*



**Response:** Communities and business understand risks, start owning risks and become a part of decision-making processes.

**Response:** A very significant investment needs to occur to produce systems and models that will be able to evaluate all values across the landscape and highlight areas where there is a conflict between management objectives and values so they can be negotiated with communities and businesses.

### **Demands on our Profession**

*7) There is a continuing need to foster and grow the current and the next generation of fire managers. Will these people come from existing forestry and natural resource management curricula or elsewhere? How do we record, learn from, and act on the varied approaches we've brought to our development of fire managers? To what degree can we utilize urban fire staffs and emergency service volunteers? How can we utilize the skills of indigenous people and agricultural traditions in the future?*

**Response:** Fire management needs to be seen as a skillset that draws more broadly than from just the traditional forestry and natural resource management sectors. The management of wildfire requires a range of other complementary skills in community engagement, economics and policy, and infrastructure planning and others. Response: Fatigue, PTSD, depression and mental health issues are increasingly being seen among our wildfire community and first responders. As fires get bigger, severity worse and seasons longer, the challenge and sense of efficacy in the fire community is diminished. Better coping mechanisms and setting expectations more realistically, given how fire is changing could help. We need more holistic treatment of individuals and the community who invest in these careers to ensure their long term well-being.

*8) Land and fire managers have multiple accountabilities and responsibilities for the lands they are managing. What are the experiences in your jurisdiction / organization / geographical area?*

**Response:** This leads to internal workload pressures or shifting organizational focus. The issues occur during protracted fire season when resources (both physical and financial) are diverted from land management into fire management, but also during "quiet" years when resource flow in the opposite direction. That flow creates tensions between those parts of organizations.

**Response:** Fire managers in Australia, the United States and in many fire management jurisdictions their responsibilities are not just land managers.

Increasingly, they have become emergency managers, covering many hazards such as bushfires, structural fires, HAZMAT, Technical rescue and so on. Landscape managers are increasingly involved in prevention and mitigation, and recovery activities as well as response and consequence management. As members of those organizations cover all the above, it means that organizations from a capability point of view have to cover risks



associated with all hazards they are responsible for and develop their agency capability so. As financial resources are always limited, this creates continuous shifting of priorities and refocusing for organizations based on organizational priorities, stakeholder views including governments and communities or through reviews and formal inquiries.

### **For background and more information**

"The Future of Wildland Fire Management. Advance Briefing Report." For the Quadrennial Fire Review Working Panels. The Brookings Institution January 15, 2008. <https://www.nifc.gov/PUBLICATIONS/QFR/QFRResearchAdvanceBriefingReport.pdf>

Stein, S.M.; Menakis, J.; Carr, M.A.; Comas, S.J.; Stewart, S.I.; Cleveland, H.; Bramwell, L.; Radeloff, V.C. 2013. "Wildfire, wildlands, and people: understanding and preparing for wildfire in the wildland-urban interface—a Forests on the Edge report." Gen. Tech. Rep. RMRS-GTR-299. Fort Collins, CO. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. <https://www.fs.fed.us/openspace/fote/reports/GTR-299.pdf>.

[An example of strategic planning in process.] "Planning for better bushfire management. Help us shape bushfire management strategies in your area." Engage Victoria. <https://engage.vic.gov.au/bushfire-planning>.

Tom Zimmerman. "President's Desk: Improving Wildland Fire Management Strategies." Wildfire Magazine. February 2016. <https://www.iawfonline.org/article/improving-wildland-fire-management-strategies/>.